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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BAMAKO 000538

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SUBJECT: MALI USING SPECIALIZED UNITS IN FIGHT AGAINST AQIM

REF: A. BAMAKO 00355

[1](#)B. BAMAKO 00383

Classified By: Political Officer Peter Newman, Embassy Bamako,
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) This report is a joint effort of the Pol/Econ section
and the Office of the Defense Attache.

[1](#)2. (S) Summary: Faced with mobile enemies on harsh terrain,
the Malian Army has created a number of specialized units
known as Echelons Tactiques Inter Armes, or ETIAs. The ETIAs
are small, mobile task forces more capable than the average
Malian army unit of operating in the isolated desert
environment of Mali's northern regions. They are composed of
elements from the Malian regular army, and are intended to be
provided with additional equipment and transportation,
although in practice the Malian army simply has not had the
resources to do this. ETIAs are often accompanied by units
of irregular soldiers from northern Mali's many private
militias. Used effectively against Tuareg bandit Ibrahim Ag
Bahanga in late 2008 and early 2009, the ETIAs are Mali's
current unit of choice in the fight against Al Qaeda in the
Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). End Summary.

Composition and Leadership

[1](#)3. (S) ETIAs are designed to serve as small, mobile task
forces capable of operating in the distant and harsh terrains
of Mali's desert north. A fully manned ETIA has roughly 200
men and 20 vehicles, including one armored vehicle platoon
(usually Russian vehicles), one field artillery platoon
(equipped with truck-mounted mortars), and five infantry
 platoons. Additionally, it is supported by a re-supply
 platoon, intended to enable the ETIA to remain in the field
beyond the 14 days it can manage without re-supply. As a
specialized task force, the ETIA is better equipped than
other Malian army units of similar size, although it is
important to note that much of the ETIA's equipment is of
old, Soviet or Chinese origin.

[1](#)4. (S) The ETIA is a composite unit, made up of platoons
taken from different units of the Malian regular army.
Although each component unit assigned to the ETIA is attached
to the ETIA for only a six-month rotation, the ETIA itself is
a permanent unit. The ETIA is generally commanded by a
Lieutenant Colonel who reports directly to the commander of
the relevant military region (e.g. Gao or Timbuktu). The
regional military commander, in turn, reports back to the
Chief of Defense, Brigadier General Gabriel Poudiougou.

[1](#)5. (S) In both the battle against Tuareg rebel leader
Ibrahim Ag Bahanga and the current drive against AQIM, ETIAs
have fought alongside units of irregular soldiers belonging
to local militias. This alliance has been driven by the

necessity of having personnel who have knowledge of the local terrain and local communities, which most Malian army regulars lack. In early 2009, Tuareg militias led by Colonels Ould Meydou and Elhadj Gamou joined the ETIAs and helped make possible the ETIAs' victories over Bahanga at Tin Essalak and Bouressa. Bahanga was ultimately pushed out of Mali.

Operation Djigui

¶6. (S) In June 2009, following the execution of British hostage Edwin Dyer (ref A) and the assassination of Malian DGSE/Army Colonel Lamana Ould Bou (ref B), the Malian government launched Operation Djigui (Operation Hope in Bambara) to neutralize AQIM activities in northern Mali. ETIAs combined into a single task force, and supported by Berabiche Arabs loyal to the late Colonel Lamana Ould Bou, engaged AQIM forces on June 15, 2009, near Temetrine, killing an unconfirmed number of AQIM combattants. Today, the ETIAs are operating independently of each other -- ETIAs 1, 4, and 6 are based in Tessalit, Timbuktu, and Nampala, respectively.

Comment

¶7. (S) Although the ETIAs are fighting alongside local militias, the two cannot and should not be confused. The ETIA is designed to be a permanent unit in the Malian army, made up of component elements taken from regular units of the

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Malian army, potentially including Tuaregs ultimately re-integrated into the Malian army pursuant to the Algiers Accords. Although the ETIAs have fought alongside and been complemented by militia forces with experience the regular army lacks, the ETIAs are not and do not include within their structures a militia force. Rather, they are specialized task forces whose small sizes make them flexible enough to take advantage of the unique opportunities that cooperation with local militias present.

¶8. (S) It is worth noting, as an indication of the GOM's thinking, that on August 1, at a multi-ethnic meeting convened in a town near Timbuktu in order to bring together the various ethnic leaders, the government conveyed its positions regarding, inter alia, its desire to promote inter-ethnic harmony and respect, the importance of struggling together to improve security in the region, notably in the face of challenges by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and the government's clear, repeated message that it is up to government forces and to them alone to confront AQIM and other security threats. The latter point, a key element of this most unusual gathering which included Arabs, Tuaregs, and other ethnic groups in the North, seems to us to be a clear indication of the GOM's desire and intention to ensure it holds the monopoly of legitimate force in the North.

¶9. (S) The Embassy's Defense Attache and SOCOM's Brigadier General Higgins in meetings here August 11 made it clear to the military leadership within the Malian Ministry of Defense (MOD), including the Secretary General, the Chief of Defense, the President's Special Advisor for military issues, and the Army Chief of Staff, that any training and support provided by the United States will be for the sole and direct benefit of regular Army units and will not be used to support militia elements. The DATT expects that regular Army units would be the end user of any provisions supplied by the United States, not simply because the Malian government understands the United States' position, but because the Malian government remains somewhat suspicious of the shifting commitments of militia elements, and can be reasonably expected to seek to ensure control over any supplies provided by the United States.

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